# Researching Scotland's Retail Buildings: From Piazzas to Pilasters

# Dr Lindsay Lennie Technical Conservation Group, Historic Scotland

#### Introduction

What I want to do today is to look at the evidence available to help us understand shops, particularly in the context of early shop development. I am going to start by giving a brief overview of the project I am undertaking for Historic Scotland before considering the research evidence and how shops emerged from being booths located within piazzas to being grand formal shopfronts. I will use a variety of archival sources which demonstrate how these pieces of evidence can help us understand shopfronts.

# **Historic Shopfronts Project Aims**

When I started my PhD researching Perthshire shops in 2002 I was very surprised at the lack of research undertaken in Scotland on retail buildings. In England considerably more research has been done, notably by Kathryn Morrison of English Heritage. The three year project funded by Technical Conservation Group, Historic Scotland has a number of aims:

- To gather information about shopfronts of all periods including those from more recent periods, throughout Scotland
- To raise awareness of importance of historic shopfronts in townscapes
- Meeting with Conservation officers, planners, retailers and THI officers
- To establish a database of historic shopfronts
- To produce a publication (Research Report)

Hopefully this research will address the research and knowledge gaps which have existed in Scotland until now. There is perhaps a lack of confidence amongst some professionals dealing with shopfronts because there has been so little information available.

#### **Researching Retail Buildings**

Shops are fascinating because of their wealth of materials and styles and the evidence available reflects this variety:

- Shop Tax Records
- Dean of Guild Court Plans
- Paintings, drawings and photographs
- Contemporary Accounts and Descriptions
- Trade directories, letterheads and other business information
- Burgh records
- Newspapers and magazines

There are held in many different locations including museums, libraries and archives, RCAHMS, National Archives of Scotland, various Internet websites- SCRAN, The Glasgow Story, Capital Collections and the Virtual Mitchell.

#### **Scotland's Early Shops**

In England there is a greater wealth of standing medieval buildings but the lack of surviving examples in Scotland means we need to examine archive evidence. We know from burgh records that there were fixed booths in Scottish towns in the 15<sup>th</sup> century but the descriptions are very limited although are most likely to have been small, timber structures.

Terminology varies but whether this reflects different types of building is hard to say. Terms used included booths or builths, krames or crames, chops, choppes or shops and Luckenbooths. However, we do know that they were numerous, often located around churches such as St Giles in Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Burgh records of 17th October 1635 state... the edificie of the kirk of Sanct Geilles to be repaired to the bewtye whereof is no littell defaced thruch the building of the choppes upon the outwallis thereof....

This suggests a rather haphazard approach with little regard for the church itself although they would have provided a very welcome source of income for the church. However, they were an encroachment and 'defaced' the church so were removed in 1817.

# 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> century Piazzas

Although there is a lack of physical evidence for early booths, piazzas, which formerly housed shops in their arcaded ground floors do still exist in a few locations. These tenements were common in many Scottish burghs from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and appear to have been encouraged and even enforced by burgh authorities who, inspired by examples on the Continent, had a vision of colonnaded streets. They were also a response to attempts by burgh authorities to reduce the risk of fire by encouraging stone-built buildings.

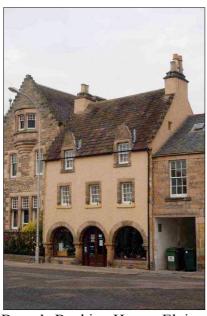
Daniel Defoe writing in the 1720's was complimentary about them although the building owners seemed less enthusiastic as this quote from the burgh records indicates where a merchant in 1758 appealed to the burgh authorities that he did not want to be 'unnecessarily burdened with a piazza'. However, the burgh records indicate that its construction was enforced.

However, a quote from Dr Johnson visiting Elgin in 1773 hints that this building form may be falling out of favour. He states that "...there is sometimes a walk for a considerable length under a cloister or portico, which is now indeed frequently broken, because the new houses have another form". Dr Johnson and his companion Boswell debated the relative merits of the piazzas but Johnson felt that they were too dark and the benefit of being under cover was not outweighed by the darkness of the shops. Certainly the impression is of small dark and low shops which paid a lower rental than other shop types. A typical booth has been recreated by the National Trust for Scotland in the piazza of Gladstone's Land in Edinburgh.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were moves to remove these piazzas by blocking them up, the shops being moved to the front of the premises although this incurred additional rent for the shop owners. The Glasgow Police Act of 1800 was in no uncertain terms keen to remove them stating that:

"..the said Shops are not only rendered dark and incommodious, but the said Piazzas in the Evenings and at Night are Receptacles for Thieves, Pickpockets and idle and disorderly Persons."

However, things often come full circle and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the surviving examples in Edinburgh (Gladstone's Land) and in Elgin were restored, giving an impression of their former glory. However, the burgh authorities idea of colonnades of arcaded building was never to be achieved.



Braco's Banking House, Elgin



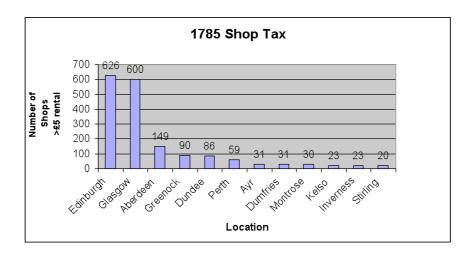
Gladstone's Land, Edinburgh

## **Shop Tax Records 1785-89**

We can deduce from the standing buildings and the burgh records that these early shops were small and dark. What other evidence is there to tell us about how numerous the shops were?

Turning from contemporary accounts to taxation records we get a different view of late 18<sup>th</sup> century retailing. The Shop Tax was introduced in 1785 as part of a raft of fiscal measures to pay for the war with France and its introduction suggests that shops were numerous enough at this time to warrant taxation. The tax was applied to all shops with an annual rental value of over £5. However, the evidence is rather patchy and perhaps unreliable. Edinburgh and Glasgow not surprisingly had the most numerous at over 600 shops in each location but perhaps more surprising is that Stirling only had 20 shops listed.

They give no real descriptions of the shops and we only get a small insight into the types of trades through the Glasgow records which list the retailers by type. The most numerous shops are grocers although the general term of merchant also applies to many others. Other than that the types are varied from booksellers to candlemakers.



### Formalising the Shopfront -The Development of the Fascia

In terms of the architecture of the shops, the development of the fascia at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century reflected a move away from hanging signs which had been in use to indicate the location of retail premises. The high level of illiteracy meant that pictorial signs were used, similar to the public house signs we see today.

However, these signs came to be regarded as a nuisance by the burgh authorities because they creaked and groaned, dripped water onto passers-by and sometimes fell down on people. Paris banned them in 1761, London in 1762, Bath in 1766 and Glasgow slightly later in 1772. The banning of these signs meant that it was necessary to utilise another type of advertising. Wooden boards are evident in some late 18<sup>th</sup> century images but it was the adoption of the fascia as the main place for the name that helped to develop the shopfront which we know today.

# Formalising the Shopfront-Bow fronts

The use of bow fronted shops goes hand in had with the development of the fascia. These allowed in more light and offered improved display space. However, perhaps more importantly, they were a statement that a shop was here and open for business.

Notably in Edinburgh, a particular type of bow front developed which although perhaps not exclusive to the city, appears to have been particularly prevalent here. This may be due to the design of the buildings here, partly in response to the steep nature of the Edinburgh topography. Images indicate these with a shorted, wide bow with a door to the basement below. In practical terms the window does not offer great display and light must be limited. In the case of the only surviving example in Edinburgh's Lawnmarket, a large pillar actually obscures the passage of light clearly indicating that this shopfront is a statement, and not just there for practical reasons.



513 Lawnmarket, Edinburgh

By the later 18<sup>th</sup> century these would have been visible in many Scottish towns and cities. A quote from the Glasgow Town Council Minutes in 1793 confirms that bow-fronted shops were now becoming commonplace:

"The improvements lately made in constructing shops with large bow windows and elegant and spacious entries, have drawn haberdashers and deallers in fashionable and valuable goods to shops in parts of the town where these improvements can be made..."

Across Scotland the bow-front was adopted although the lack of surviving examples makes it difficult to determine how much they varied. It is likely that local fashions, joinery skills and retailer aspirations and affluence all played a part in local styles.

## Formal Designs: Pattern Books

In some ways these bow-fronted shops can be considered as vernacular buildings but more formal designs did exist, perhaps inspired by examples from London or from the pattern books for shops that were beginning to be published at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Evidence for the existence of these shopfronts is limited but purpose-built tenements with elaborately designed ground floors were certainly evident at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as Spreul's Land in Trongate, Glasgow.



Advert in Glasgow Herald 1793 Spreul's Land

built 1784 in an 'elegant and substantial manner' (Mitchell Library, Glasgow)

#### **Formal Designs: Elliptical Arches**

Shops made use of elegant Classical forms such as the elliptical arch. This was used for 3 and 4 Hunter Square, Edinburgh designed in 1788-90 by John Baxter for the Merchant Company of Edinburgh. The ground floors were reinstated in 1996 for EDI Group by Gray Marshall & Associates.



Hunter Square, Edinburgh

What is of interest is that Perth Museum & Art Gallery holds a letterhead for a shopfront in Perth in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century which has a very similar elliptical arch. This was a shopfront

for the drapers, H Mitchell & Co, 15 St John St, Perth. It was drapers and jewellers who were the most affluent retailers and who often led the way in shopfront design and in adopting new technological advances. It is also significant that a town like Perth would have such an elegant shopfront, indicating that formal designs were not confined to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

# Formal Designs: South Bridge, Edinburgh

In addition to these individual tenements with formal ground floors, larger schemes were also envisaged at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Robert Adam was responsible for designing a number of schemes including Leith Street (1785) and Pulteney Bridge in Bath (1770-73), the Adelphi in London (1768-71). The latter was a multi-level concept which was then transferred to South Bridge in Edinburgh in 1785 as a viaduct street. However, it was never built and instead a less elaborate design by Robert Kay was built 1786-88. Adam made use of arched ground floors for shop design and this then became an important feature for shopfronts.



South Bridge, Edinburgh: reinstated shopfronts

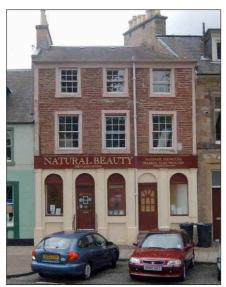
#### Formalising the Shopfront- Arched Openings

Adam had pioneered the use of the arch in his Classical tenements and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the arched opening became a favoured feature of shops, often in purpose-built tenements. Here the regularity of the arches allowed a polite appearance to shopfronts and the band course above offered a space for the name to be painted. It also allowed flexibility for double and single fronted shops without affecting the fenestration. Examples from circa 1810 and 1815 in Aberdeen and Edinburgh demonstrate how effective this is for shopfronts.



35-41 West Nicolson St, Edinburgh, 1815

By the 1820's this design progressed by the incorporation of pilasters around these arched openings. This combination of architectural detail gives a particularly pleasing effect.



6 Abbey Place, Jedburgh, arched openings with pilasters, c1825

## **Formalising the Shopfront: Pilasters**

The pilaster has been adopted as one of the ubiquitous shopfront elements. It is not clear when they were first used in shopfront design but initially they appear to have been placed around the existing openings with little adaptation of the building. Certainly examples are evident in drawings from at least 1818 and possibly earlier.

Early examples were narrow and sometimes fluted and Victorian examples were sometimes highly decorative being particularly popular from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kelso probably has the greatest concentration of surviving pilastered shopfronts in Scotland, some of them with double pilasters. This reflects a time when the town expanded in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the arrival of the railway.

## **Ever-changing shopfronts**

The use of pilasters is one of the architectural features most closely associated with shopfront design, together with the console bracket. This was used later, perhaps the 1830's but certainly by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it featured in a variety of shapes and sizes on numerous Victorian shopfronts.

A Dean of Guild Court drawing for 74-84 South Bridge dating to 1841 is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that shop design never stands still. The use of consoles is clearly used here and the abandonment of the arches, favoured only a few years earlier. Instead the windows are tall, maximising light and display, with 3 horizontal window panes. Although the Glass Tax was not lifted until 1845 there were improvements in technology with plate glass developed in the 1830's allowing panes to be larger than before.

# Stylish Scotland?: Shopping Mid 19th C

Advertising images from trades directories give an indication of what shops were like by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although these are perhaps rather sanitised given that they are for advertising purposes they do reflect the fact that shopping from Elgin to Edinburgh had

become a polite past-time with shops with elegant entrances, pilasters although multi-paned windows were clearly still popular.

By this time retailing had taken off with the industrialisation of Victorian Britain. Soon, plate glass, cast iron and ceramic tiling would be available to shopkeepers of all but the most lowly positions and by the end of the century the shops were light years away from the small, dark low shops of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Summary**

To summarise the points made:

- The earliest shops were simple timber booths.
- Scottish burghs developed local characteristics such as piazzas and high level bow-fronted shops, perhaps encouraged by local fashions or topography.
- Gradually from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Classical elements were utilised for shopfronts- the fascia, arches, pilasters and console brackets.
- By the 1820's and 1830's formally designed shopfronts, some in purpose-built schemes were becoming commonplace.
- By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Scotland's towns and cities had many grand and formally designed shops which were beginning to use plate glass and cast iron but London undoubtedly led the way in style and design, its affluence reflected in its shops.
- Certain retailers notably drapers and jewellers seem to have invested in more elaborate shops and made use of new products like plate glass.

## **Conserving Scotland's Retail Buildings**

Kate Clark (2001:12) states:

"What distinguishes that which might be conserved from that which will not is value or significance. Significance lies at the heart of every conservation action."

If we do not know what is significant we cannot hope to undertake informed conservation decisions. In undertaking conservation for a shop or any other historic building we must find out about the building. This is where the archives are invaluable.

- Archives present an invaluable source of information on shops of all periods
- Evidence is not comprehensive and may not be a true reflection of the situationarchive survival is selective

But, the evidence can help with:

- Recognising the importance of early shops and their rarity
- Identifying distinctive local characteristics from all periods
- Conservation and restoration work

The conservation of surviving traditional shopfronts is of importance because very few exceptionally good examples survive. Archives can help us make informed decisions about undertaking work to these traditional shopfronts.